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ABSTRACT

In May 2001, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) asked higher education institutions in England to submit full 3-year strategies and action plans for widening participation. This document provides an overview of those strategies and plans and shows the development that has taken place since 1999, when institutions submitted initial strategic statements of their approach to widening participation. Findings show that significant gains have been made in institutional approaches to widening participation. Areas identified as weak in 1999 all improved. Variation remains in the sophistication of institutional approaches to widening participation. Overall, strategies are generally well integrated with action plans, and there is evidence of links between widening participation and other institutional strategies. Two-thirds of the strategies submitted show commitment to social inclusion, and nearly the same number focus on student success and retention. (SLD)

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ED 476 444

March 2003/09

Core funding/operations

Report on strategies and action plans

This report is for information

In May 2001 we asked higher education institutions to submit full three-year strategies and action plans for widening participation (see HEFCE 01/29). This document provides an overview of those strategies and plans, and shows the development which has taken place since 1999, when institutions submitted initial strategic statements of their approach to widening participation.

Review of 2001 widening participation strategies and action plans from HEIs

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Review of 2001 widening participation strategies and action plans from higher education institutions

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of universities in Northern Ireland
Of interest to those responsible for	Widening participation, corporate planning
Reference	2003/09
Publication date	March 2003
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. In May 2001 (HEFCE 01/29) we asked higher education institutions to submit full three-year strategies and action plans for widening participation (WP). This document provides an overview of those strategies and plans, and shows the development which has taken place since 1999, when institutions submitted initial strategic statements of their approach to WP.

2. In addition to providing this overview of developments in the sector, which is of interest to policy-makers, the review will provide useful information for institutions as they monitor and revise their own strategies, providing a picture of the emerging patterns within the sector against which to benchmark their own work.

Key points

3. Significant gains have been made in institutional approaches to WP. Areas that had been identified as weak in 1999 had all improved.

4. Though there is evidence of a general improvement, there is still significant variation between institutions in the sophistication of their approaches to WP, with some excellent practice but with others taking a less strategic approach.

5. The strategies are generally well integrated with the action plans, and there is considerable evidence of links between WP and other institutional strategies, particularly for learning and teaching.

6. Two-thirds of the strategies show commitment to social inclusion, and nearly the same number focus on student success and retention.

Action required

7. None: this report is for information.

Background

8. This review brings together two analyses. HEFCE's national co-ordination team for WP, Action on Access, examined all the strategies submitted. Alongside this, HEFCE higher education advisers analysed the action plans of the institutions for which they are responsible, assessing them against the strategies and the institutions' wider corporate plans.

Initial strategic statements

9. We have been encouraging higher education institutions (HEIs) to widen participation in higher education for a number of years, and many institutions have themselves been very active in this field. However, it was not until 1999 (in HEFCE 99/33) that we asked for strategic statements on WP. Because this was the first request, we defined these as 'initial strategic statements'. We did ask institutions to account for their use of the funding they received for WP (the 'postcode premium'), but we gave only broad indications of what the strategies should contain and did not ask for detailed action plans.

10. Following the submission of the initial strategic statements, Action on Access undertook an analysis that focused on the extent to which HEIs had made use of the guidelines in HEFCE 99/33. The analysis highlighted areas of both strength and weakness within the statements at institutional, regional, and sector levels. The major weaknesses identified at sector level were:

- limited reference to student retention
- insufficient use of performance indicators (PIs)
- limited reference to the setting of targets for students from non-traditional groups
- few links to other institutional policies, particularly learning and teaching (L&T) strategies, giving the impression that the statement may have been developed in isolation from other core activities
- a lack of clarity over monitoring arrangements.

11. Though we might have expected to see strong links between the widening participation initial statements and other strategies, we were not surprised that this was not the case. We asked for institutional L&T strategies at almost the same time as we asked for WP initial statements, so many institutions did not have an agreed strategy in either area. Also, L&T and WP policy and practice have traditionally been the preserve of different specialists within HEIs, often based in different units, and the process of developing links was not always straightforward, even when institutions did see these links.

12. The following were the strongest areas in the initial statements:

- aims and objectives for widening participation
- mechanisms for achieving the aims and objectives
- analysis of the profile of the student population, both as it existed at the time and the groups that might be targeted.

13. After the submission of the 1999 initial statements, we encouraged a number of developments designed to raise the profile of WP and support good practice. Action on Access, as part of its support strategy, disseminated the findings from its analysis, and HEFCE regional teams gave feedback to individual institutions.

Request for full strategies

14. In 2001, we moved forward from this initial position. HEFCE 01/29 asked higher education institutions to submit three-year strategies for WP, accompanied by action plans detailing activities and targets associated with the spend of the postcode premium (and, where applicable, the aspiration funding). The strategies and action plans were expected to build on institutions' initial strategic statements.

15. National and regional seminars were organised in 2001 to support institutions in developing their full strategies. In June 2001, we published two guides to good practice – for WP strategies (HEFCE 01/36) and for L&T strategies (HEFCE 01/37). These documents were informed by the analysis of the initial WP strategic statements by Action on Access (HEFCE 01/36a), and an analysis of early learning and teaching strategies by Professor Graham Gibbs (HEFCE 01/37a). By simultaneously publishing the two guides and the analyses of existing strategies for WP and L&T, we were encouraging institutions to see the connections between the two areas and to develop links between them.

16. The sector feedback from the guides was extremely positive and, as hoped, they became a major source of reference for HEIs as they prepared their revised WP strategies and action plans. We asked for strategies to be submitted in either July or October 2001. Two dates were offered to allow for institutional committee cycles, though some institutions used the opportunity to submit a draft for comment in July, and a final version in October.

Assessment of the 2001 strategies and action plans

17. Most HEIs submitted full documentation, although for some strategies it was difficult to be sure if they were incomplete submissions or in draft form. Likewise, virtually all institutions returned action plans, with more than three-quarters providing three-year plans. Less than 3 per cent of HEIs failed to return an action plan by October 2001. In these cases, HEFCE officers worked with the institutions to ensure that a draft action plan was produced, followed by a full action plan as part of the annual operating statement returns to HEFCE in July 2002.

Comparison of the strategies and action plans with the 1999 initial statements

18. Since the guidelines for full submissions in 2001 were much more detailed than those for the 1999 initial statements, only broad comparisons between the two can be made. We asked HEIs to provide more detailed strategies in 2001, which included most of the areas covered by the 1999 statements, but also incorporated new ones. In the action plans, we

asked for a year-by-year breakdown with cross-referencing to the strategy. (See Annexes D and E of HEFCE 01/29.)

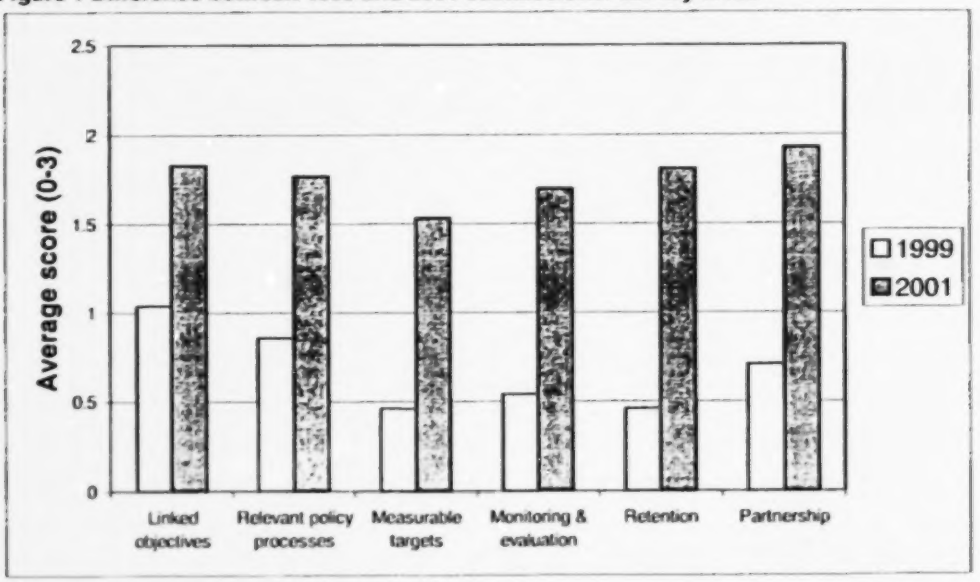
19. The Action on Access team used the same general approach in reviewing the full strategies as for the initial statements. Each strategy was reviewed against the extent to which it made use of the criteria given in HEFCE 01/29. The team completed an assessment sheet for each strategy and allocated a score from 0-3 to each of the 11 key criteria (where 0 represented 'not covered', 1 'covered', 2 'well covered', and 3 'very well covered'). It included comments and document cross-references on assessment sheets. The team also made broad qualitative assessments on the overall contribution that each strategy might make to:

- growth in student numbers
- social inclusion
- student success and retention.

20. Figure 1 shows that significant development has taken place since 1999. In particular there has been:

- increased evidence of linking objectives to related processes
- moves towards setting institutional and in some cases departmental targets
- development of monitoring and evaluation arrangements
- greater focus on retention
- continuing development of partnership arrangements.

Figure 1 Difference between 1999 and 2001 submissions: six key areas



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Institutional context

21. Institutional context was a difficult factor to review, as there was no direct comparison with the 1999 submissions. References to mission statements and corporate plans featured strongly in the strategies, as did awareness of the profile of the student population, both present and potential. It was not always clear where connections were made between, for example, plans for student growth and fit with WP strategic plans for admissions. In general there seemed to be a developing recognition of the impact that the institutional context can have on participation.

22. This is a significant question for institutions, since addressing WP without focusing on associated organisational changes is likely to weaken the impact of the WP activities, but the organisational changes are themselves difficult to implement. As the targets for WP become more sophisticated and demanding, with a focus on three dimensions – increased participation, widened participation and fairer access – this issue is likely to become more significant.

Linked objectives

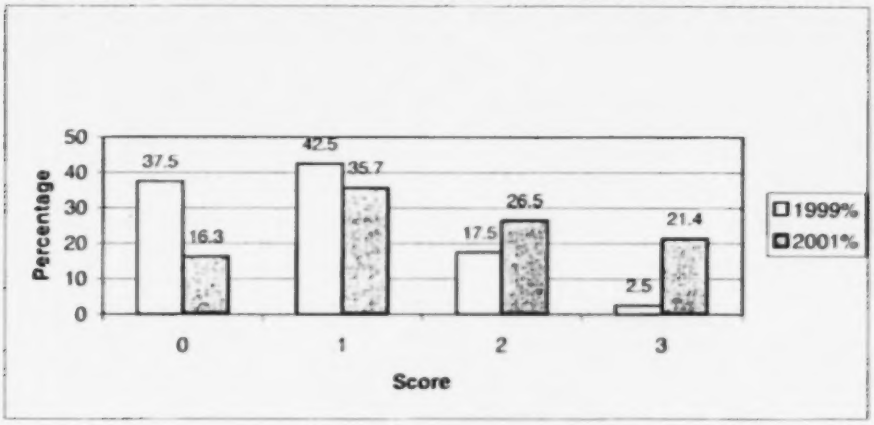
23. There was strong evidence of progress towards a more integrated strategic approach to WP, with more links to other plans and strategies.

24. L&T strategies were the most often mentioned, followed by human resources strategies and disability statements. The last were more often mentioned if the institution had received HEFCE funding for a disability project. IT and financial strategies were less often mentioned.

25. The references to the L&T strategies tended to focus on the use of targets and PIs, with less focus on the changes in approach to L&T which might be needed as a result of implementing the WP strategies. There was evidence of the use of the good practice guidance, particularly in the focus on the 'student life-cycle' which was the organising principle of the guide.

Measurable targets

Figure 2 Sector-wide scores for use of measurable targets, 1999 and 2001



26. There was significant improvement in the use of measurable targets between 1999 and 2001. However, there is still more to be done to ensure that targets are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound), to provide a firm basis for yearly monitoring. Most institutions presented satisfactory information in relation to target setting in their action plans, but only a quarter did so consistently and throughout the plans. Most of the targets were still expressed at the institutional level, with much less use in faculties, schools and departments. In some cases, HEIs had developed institutional targets and were planning to extend them to other levels.

27. There was a significant increase in the use of PIs as reference points and baselines against which improvements could be measured. The evidence points to PIs growing in importance as a planning tool for WP in the sector, but they are not being used as the main driver for the strategies.

Impact on other policy processes

28. There was evidence that the WP strategies were having an impact on other relevant policy areas. Many institutions were planning to address both their admissions and staff development policies in order to bring them into line with their WP strategies. Admissions staff were learning to deliver pre-entry advice and guidance to applicants from targeted schools and colleges, or to identify students with non-traditional entry qualifications in order to offer study skills support. Institutions have evaluated admissions procedures, reviewing student rejections from the WP target groups, increasing selectors' familiarity with non-traditional entry qualifications, or flagging up applications from local education authorities in Excellence in Cities areas.

29. Staff development featured significantly in the action plans, and many institutions reported that funds had been channelled into this. Examples of the types of activities include:

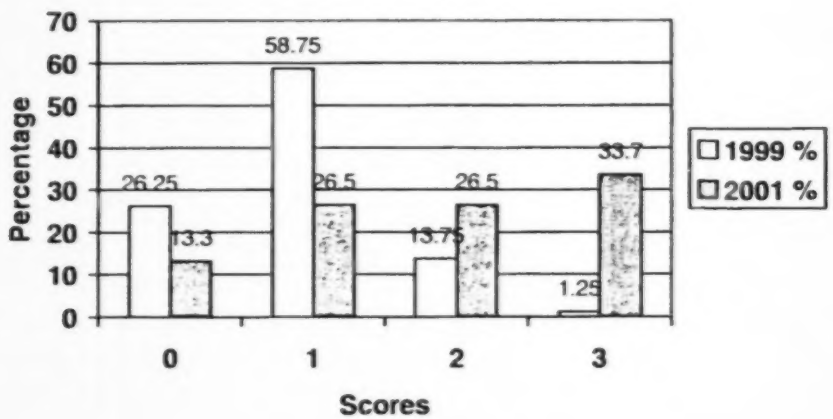
- awareness raising, particularly in relation to disability equality, where a number of institutions have organised training events aimed at developing and disseminating good practice
- enhancing links with partners. For example, one university careers service has collaborated with schools and colleges to set up a staff development programme and communication network, with the aim of providing information, guidance and careers advice to students progressing to HE.

30. A significant number of institutions reported that they were reviewing their provision for students with disabilities, to ensure that they were supported at all stages of their higher education experience. Many said that they recognised the need to comply with the Special Education Needs and Disability Act, and to improve their capacity to offer specialised learning resources to students with disabilities.

31. Our analysis therefore showed that WP strategies and action plans are becoming catalysts for review and change in other policy areas. This is an important development and suggests that WP is being embedded in the core activity of many more institutions than was the case in 1999.

Student success (retention)

Figure 3 Sector-wide scores for retention, 1999 and 2001



32. The strategies showed a significant improvement on the 1999 position. Retention had become a much more significant issue for many institutions, with an increased analysis of the data and with clear targets for improvement. Institutions were much more aware of the need to develop a fuller understanding of what factors contribute to non-completion and what

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preventative measures might be developed. The strategies also showed evidence of investment in supporting student success, with reference to a number of stages of the student life-cycle.

33. Most institutions described their plans for monitoring and evaluating retention policies. A number were planning to survey existing students from relevant postcode areas and social classes IIIM to V, to identify their needs and evaluate their experiences in relation to pre-entry advice and information, registration, induction, and on-course support. A number planned to carry out audits to measure the reasons for students withdrawing or experiencing academic difficulties. PIs feature strongly as a means to monitor WP performance in relation to student success and retention, with institutions assessing themselves against the national benchmarks. Some institutions have devolved this information to departments to enable closer monitoring of student performance by module, and are using the data to inform practices to minimise withdrawal of students at risk.

34. The most tangible outcomes of retention policies relate to improvements in student support. Most institutions are targeting this area, having been informed by the particular needs of students from under-represented groups, and ensuring equitable provision for all students. They are using a range of approaches, including induction into the culture of HE, additional teaching and learning support, enhanced pastoral and welfare care, and close monitoring of progression, including key skills development.

35. Research activities are also under way at some institutions, examining the differing learning support systems that need to be developed and introduced to meet the diverse range of students' needs, as well as identifying progression opportunities and barriers between the HEIs, partner further education (FE) colleges and other providers. The results of this research will inform curriculum development and provide information for advice and guidance staff.

36. A number of institutions reported that their WP premium funding has been used to develop ways of delivering a flexible and accessible curriculum, to provide a more inclusive learning environment. This has involved embedding learning opportunities for the development of personal, transferable skills within the curriculum, and reviewing progression arrangements with partner institutions.

37. Financial hardship is recognised as a major factor in students' decisions to withdraw from their courses. Bursaries and hardship support are alleviating some of these difficulties, particularly for students from Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone areas.

Reference to collaborative WP projects

38. In 1999, we established a special initiative to widen participation, jointly with the Further Education Funding Council (now the Learning and Skills Council, LSC). We asked institutions to bid for funding for three-year regional or sub-regional collaborative projects, running from January 2000 to December 2002. We issued the call for bids at the same time as the call for the initial WP statements, and we hoped that the initial statements and the

project bids would cross-refer to each other. This was rarely the case, even though the majority of HEIs were partners in the collaborative projects.

39. By 2001, there had been significant improvement. The strategies showed that most HEIs were making links to the special projects within their regions. Such projects were, in many cases, making a major contribution to achieving the HEIs' strategic aims and objectives, and were becoming embedded in the institutions' work. As part of this, institutions were increasingly recognising the benefits of partnership working for WP.

Reference to work with FE colleges and schools

40. Many of the strategies recognised the importance of working with FE colleges and schools in order to achieve their WP aims. Strategies covered a broader range of activities than the initial statements. The emphasis tended to be on exposure to HE or on work to raise aspirations. This work is often being targeted at specific groups or areas, sometimes with advice from partners. There was also extensive reference to improving progression routes from FE to HE. In their work with schools, institutions are focusing on aspiration raising and are working with much younger age groups. We also saw evidence of an increase in the use of family learning. There has been growth in family learning initiatives in schools, so we might be seeing two sets of initiatives joining up.

41. A number of institutions are focusing on identifying schools with low levels of progression to higher education. While some institutions have well-established links, others have had to work out ways of developing partnerships. A novel approach to targeting disadvantaged groups was devised by one institution, which analysed the pupils receiving free school meals and established links with schools based on this study. Others have started to work with local schools to incorporate an experience of higher education into the school curriculum, or to provide school-based taster courses throughout the academic year.

42. Links into schools are generally aimed at pupils aged between 13 and 16, although some projects have targeted children as young as 9. A significant number of HEIs have run summer schools, using funds allocated by HEFCE, or from the Excellence Challenge programme, donations or their own resources. Some summer schools are discipline-based, such as veterinary medicine, music or health studies. Others focus on specific groups where there is low participation, for example some minority ethnic groups.

43. The institutions have organised a range of activities, taking account of the target groups and ages of the pupils. Generally, the more common week-long events are aimed at older pupils, aged 14-16, and include an introduction to higher education to raise awareness of the opportunities offered. However, many institutions run shorter workshops and taster days for younger pupils, which often include parents. Examples are 'apprentice students on campus days' for pupils aged between 10 and 12, where pupils and their families spend a day on campus with student tutors; and 'high flyer' master classes in Excellence in Cities areas. Most of these events take place in the summer vacation, although a number of institutions reported that the Easter and winter vacations are proving to be popular alternatives.

44. Student mentoring schemes have been another popular method of establishing links with schools in areas of low participation. They aim to raise the aspirations of pupils that have been identified as benefiting from assistance. Student 'ambassadors' have been trained to promote the benefits of higher education in the wider community. Their role includes supporting local open days, attending HE fairs, and inducting and mentoring new students. Programmes of support for pupils aged 9-13 through specially trained mentors include classroom activities, workshops for pupils and their parents, support at parents' evenings, visits to the partner HEI, and on-campus shadowing.

45. Many institutions have committed funding to maintain and extend partnership arrangements. Several HEIs have decided to extend their associate college networks to a wider range of FE partners, while others are sharing their WP strategies with both HE and FE partners in order to maximise coverage regionally. Links with other regional organisations have been explored, for example Local Learning Partnerships, the Connexions Service, local government and the voluntary sector.

46. As part of their strategies, institutions have invested in specialist staff to support aspiration-raising activities. Examples include: regional recruitment officers to develop regional teachers' forums and regional conferences, and to co-ordinate college access work; further education officers to develop links with FE colleges; and aspiration project officers to work with Excellence in Cities partnerships and undertake school liaison work. Some institutions have employed staff to manage summer school activities, and student advice officers to provide up to date information on financial support available to students.

Excellence Challenge

47. Many institutions have been working with the areas covered by the Excellence Challenge for some time. They had developed their own terminology for this activity prior to the introduction of Excellence Challenge in April 2001. Many of the strategies continued to use their own terminology and thus explicit references in the strategies to the Excellence Challenge programme were less frequent than the underlying reality, which reflects a strong integration between the strategies of the HEIs and the Excellence Challenge programme.

48. The action plans showed that institutions have exploited Excellence Challenge partnerships to develop formal links with Education Action Zones as a way of accessing target groups. A number of institutions have focused on aspiration-raising activities, and have started to establish partnerships with local schools to encourage more applications from state-educated students. The Excellence in Cities programme has been useful in developing links between inner city schools and higher education providers.

Broad policy priorities

49. As well as reviewing the strategies against the guidelines in HEFCE 01/29 and comparing them with the initial statements, we also asked the Action on Access team to give an overall assessment of the extent to which the strategies contributed to three key policy priorities. Because of the complexity of providing precise quantitative results, we have given

broad indications in the assessment below. We asked a straightforward Yes/No question in relation to each policy area, though we have supplemented this with some comments. The three policy priorities were growth in student numbers, social inclusion, and student success and retention.

Growth in student numbers

50. Though just over half (51 per cent) of the strategies plan to increase student numbers, there is wide variation, with some planning significant growth and others not mentioning growth at all.

Focus on social inclusion

51. Sixty-six per cent of the strategies focus on the wider goal of social inclusion and see this as a strategic aim. They are not concerned simply with WP for their own institution in order to meet government targets, but see inclusion as an important social aim in its own right.

Student success

52. Sixty-five per cent of the strategies focus on student success and retention, which they see as crucial. In doing so, many refer to the student life-cycle.

Conclusions

53. This review highlights areas where significant gains were made between 1999 and 2001. Areas that were identified as weak in 1999 had all improved by 2001. This general improvement does not mean that all HEIs improved at a similar rate, and variations between HEIs continued to be significant.

54. There was substantial evidence in the 2001 strategies of a more integrated and coherent approach to strategic planning for WP. The analysis showed a high level of coherence between the strategies and the action plans, with virtually all HEIs demonstrating clear links between the two documents. Of these, more than half demonstrated this very well, and there were a number of examples of excellent practice. Some showed the key aims of the strategy mirrored in the action plan, with a breakdown of how funds were to be allocated to the strategic activities, and milestones with timescales and quantifiable outputs.

55. There is a strong sense that institutions are generally committed to both social inclusion and student success, though there was less commitment evident in the strategies to growth in student numbers.

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